

TESTIMONY OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY IN SUPPORT OF FUNDING FOR THE COMMISSION ON CHILD PROTECTION

March 3, 2011

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy. The Center is a nonprofit organization based at the University of Connecticut School of Law that provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy. Through our Child Abuse Project, the Center represents children in child abuse and neglect cases and provides training and technical support to attorneys who represent both children and parents in these proceedings.

We urge you to approve the Governor's proposed funding for the Commission on Child Protection.

The Commission's primary mission is to ensure poor indigent children and families involved with Juvenile Court child protection proceedings have competent and thorough legal representation to assist them.

Abused and neglected children need and deserve lawyers who have the time, training, and ability to give voice to their needs.

In Connecticut, we have been able to boast for many years that every child has a lawyer. But the sad truth was that this guarantee of legal representation was not a guarantee of quality and historically many children received representation that was woefully inadequate.

Commission Created Training, Practice and Caseload Standards Critical to Improving Representation for Poor Children

The Commission on Child Protection is the most critical tool to address the problem of inadequate representation. Prior to the creation of the Commission, attorneys were not required to receive training or demonstrate expertise. There were no practice standards and no caseload standards. There was little oversight and no effective system of accountability.

Prior to the Creation of the Commission, Some Children Reported That They Never Met Their Lawyers

More importantly, prior to the efforts to reform the legal delivery system, it was not uncommon to hear that children who had been abused or neglected by their parents had never met their attorneys. Their complaints and needs were never heard by their lawyers and, consequently, never heard by the courts.

Lawyers for children and parents protect important rights

Lawyers for children and parents address the following issues, among others:

1. Family reunification
2. Inadequate placements for children
3. Visitation
4. Access to mental health services
5. Education issues

The Commission must have the resources to ensure that each child and his or her parent has a trained, professional attorney to represent them who can ensure that the rights of their clients to safety, family, nurturance and assistance are guarded and protected.

The Commission has achieved numerous accomplishments over the past couple of years, all of which serve to improve legal advocacy for vulnerable children.

- ***Certification Program:*** The Commission led the effort to make Child Welfare Law a Legal Specialty to Connecticut and provided qualified and dedicated attorneys the means to become certified by the National Association of Counsel for Children.
- ***Caseload Standards.*** The Commission reduced maximum caseloads for a majority of attorneys. Prior to the creation of the Commission there were no case load standards for attorneys practicing in Juvenile Court.
- ***Attorney Assessment/Application Review.*** The Commission continues to conduct attorney observations throughout the state's Juvenile Courts. Additionally, the Commission reviews all of the renewal applications submitted by the contract attorneys; the Commission conducts reference checks, random case and billing audits, and in some cases interviews.
- ***Training and Mentoring.*** In collaboration with the Center for Children's Advocacy, the Commission provides pre-service and in-service training for new and experienced juvenile court practitioners. Additionally, the Commission ensures that each new lawyer has an experienced mentor to assist them during their first year in practice.

Commission is a National Leader in Reforming Model for Legal Representation for Poor Children

Pilot Projects for Multi-Disciplinary Child Welfare Law Offices: Most importantly, the Commission has created regional offices to provide Multi-Disciplinary legal representation for abused and neglected children. Today, the South Eastern Connecticut Center for Juvenile Justice in Waterford, Willimantic and Hartford, Connecticut Legal Services, and New Haven Legal Assistance all provide a holistic model of representation for approximately thousands of children in the state. The Center applauds this innovative and necessary reform effort to ensure that the multiple and often complex needs of vulnerable abused and neglected children are met.

We urge you maintain necessary funding for the Commission on Child Protection and to reinforce the message that Connecticut's abused and neglected children matter and that they deserve to have a voice.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

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